

The Frescoes of Ambrogio Lorenzetti

An Allegory on Good and Bad Government



DR, LEONARD TAYLOR

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The New Digest is delighted to welcome this post by Dr Leonard Taylor. Dr Taylor is a lecturer in law, with an LLM and PhD in human rights law from the Irish Centre for Human Rights. He researches on human rights law, the history of human rights and political Catholicism. He has recently published a monograph with Cambridge University Press, titled Catholic

Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights. This work details the contribution and relationship between the growth of human rights ideas and Catholic jurisprudence and legal tradition that developed from the Middle Ages to the present time.

The frescos of Ambrogio Lorenzetti created in the 14th century can contribute to our appreciation of the relationship of the virtues to the common good in the exercise of good government. The frescos were commissioned by the government of Siena between 1337 and 1340 to decorate the council chamber in the Palazzo Pubblico. Political iconography was common at the time, and its survival over the centuries provides a wonderful window into the nature of Good Government, the virtues, and the common good.

Primarily, the frescos are believed to address the nine magistrates, the *Sala dei Nove* ("Salon of Nine"), as elected officials who held executive and judicial functions within the government of Siena. In total there are three panels, with six different scenes, which cover three of the council chambers interior walls. The panels depict the Allegory of Good Government, and the Allegory of Bad Government, each in turn is portrayed with a consequence upon the city, and on the countryside, to make up the six different scenes.

On the north wall we find the centrepiece of the Allegory of Good Government, where there is a figure presented who appears sovereign and regal or princely, and considered to be either the embodiment of sovereignty or more likely the embodiment of the Common Good. This brings to mind Kantorowicz's distinction of the king's two bodies, the body natural and the body politic, embodied in the one individual.^[1] The critic Nicolai Rubinstein proposed the allegory revealed 'the Aristotelian concept of the common good as the basis and criterion of good government', and consequently 'the common good must be raised to the position of the ruler' if the city is to achieve to good government.^[2] The sovereign holds in his left hand a shield, with what is believed to be a depiction of the Virgin Mary.

Further to the left side of the sovereign is the figure of justice, who in turn is flanked by the angelic figures of distributive justice and commutative justice who are distributing justice, and ascending above the head of justice is sapientia (Wisdom). The pre-eminence of wisdom in the 14th century is captured in the mirror of princes tradition as

a guiding principle for good government. While commutative justice was understood to carry punitive measures, the idea that there was punitive jurisdiction over distributive justice is not as a result of either the thought of Aristotle or Aquinas according to Rubinstein but a modification in response to Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum*.^[3] That there could be a punitive consequence to a failure to show concern for distributive justice is a peculiarity in the fresco but reflective of the overall theme of the common good.

Bringing the sovereign and justice together is the further use of analogy by Lorenzetti. In the sovereign's right hand there is a sceptre to indicate his authority, on the base of the handle there is a cord attached, and this cord extends outward and down to twenty-four councillors each who hold the cord in their hands. The length of cord ends in the hand of the ancient Roman figure of Concordia (to symbolise the virtue of concord or harmony in political life). Concordia sits at the feet of justice, and so this can represent how justice binds and is carried through a well-ordered concord and harmony and are directed into the hands of the common good.

The various virtues and the Common Good.

The common good as a sovereign figure is flanked on either side by several virtues, on his righthand we have the embodiments of prudence, of fortitude, and of peace, and to his left hand we have the figures of magnanimity, of temperance, and of justice. Each representation of the virtues carries a symbol of their office to indicate their task in relation to the common good, for example fortitude carries the sovereign's armour, temperance carries an hourglass, justice a sword and crown, magnanimity holds a crown of honour, and for peace, she holds an olive branch. Above the head of the sovereign are the three angelic virtues of faith, who carries a cross, hope who looks in awe into divine glory, and charity who reveals a flaming heart.

The unusual virtues of magnanimity and peace.

It may seem unusual to have the cultivation of the virtues of peace and of magnanimity included alongside the classical list of the four cardinal virtues, but they find their place among the virtues required to accomplish good government, and in the exercise of concern for the true ends of society, namely the common good.^[4] Rubinstein remarks

that the organisation of the virtues follow the conventional “mirror of princes” (*specula principum*) and are a pictorial representation of the tradition, with additional political virtues essential to rule in service of the common good.[5]

Lists of virtues, according to McIntyre have varied through history, from the pagan Homer to the saintly life of Aquinas, and then to more humanist invocation of the virtues that shifted our understanding again.[6] Homer, emphasised *aretē*, the paradigm of human excellence that is symbolised as the warrior, while for Aristotle it is the stately citizen, and we can presume for Aquinas it would have been the saint. The 14th century saw a flourishing of literature and texts that examined the virtues and vices associated with government in an effort to restore the fortunes of Italian republics. Familiar with these traditions we can infer that Lorenzetti had considered magnanimity and peace appropriate political virtues for a sovereign who must rule the city for the common good. Magnanimity is an Aristotelian virtue and not normally listed among Christian virtues where humility is preferred. However, Aquinas had praised magnanimity as one of the virtues as it denotes ‘stretching forth of the mind to great things’.[7]

Machiavelli’s theory of rulership by the prince had rejected the place of the virtues and replaced them with cunning and strength, or to use Machiavelli’s own metaphor, the fox and the lion. Maritain described this rejection of the centrality of the virtues as a turn towards,

[...] *merely artistic politics*, liberated from ethics, that is, from the practical knowledge of man, from the science of human acts, from truly human finalities and truly human doings, is a corpse of political wisdom and political prudence.[8]

Maritain considered this shift in understanding of good governance as a turn to radical pessimism that lay at the heart of Machiavelli’s anthropology of human nature, placing self-interest over solidarity, and pettiness over magnanimity. Machiavelli accepted the irredeemable tendencies in human beings, and promoted a guarded and tactful engagement in political life. Fundamentally, Machiavelli’s ‘crude empiricism cancels for him the image of God in man – a cancelation which is the metaphysical root of every power politics and every political totalitarianism’.[9]

This logic is evident in the centrepiece of the Allegory of Bad Government in the council chamber in the Palazzo Pubblico. The allegory presents a malevolent figure, named Tyranny, who appears horned and demonic, and is accompanied on the lefthand by the vices of fury, division, and of conflict, and on the righthand there are the vices of fraud, betrayal and the vice of cruelty. The theological vices that are extended above tyranny are avarice and vainglory, with pride lying at the heart of the threesome. At the feet of tyranny is a bound female figure, the depiction of justice in chains. This diabolical vision uproots peace, and destroys the greatness of soul required to rule for the common good.

In Michael Foran's [observation](#), liberal political theory stops short with the restraint of tyranny but does not strive for the virtues in preference for a thin theory of the good. However, a pre-Enlightenment example reveals that if tyranny and the numerous vices could destroy an Italian city state, in Lorenzetti's Allegory on Good and Bad Government only concern for the common good could restore the virtues and bring harmony and peace in these new republics.

Magnanimity and peace contributes additional political virtues to the cardinal virtues, for they stood in opposition to the pettiness and sectarianism of life in Siena, and an antidote to vainglory while holding high office, but as Vermeule [observed](#), this is not merely the absence of war and discord but these virtues lead to the tranquillity of order that concerns itself with the common good. The Common Good is revealed with the virtues through the exercise of justice in the procession of an ordered liberty and concord within the new republic.

[1] E.H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[2] Nicolai Rubinstein, 'Political Ideas in Sienese Art: The Frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti and Taddeo Di Bartolo in the Palazzo Pubblico', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 21/3/4 (1958), 179-207.

[3] *Ibid.* 183.

[4] Mary M. Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[5] Rubinstein, 'Political Ideas in Sieneese Art: The Frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti and Taddeo Di Bartolo in the Palazzo Pubblico', (14. See also P. Boucheron, *The Power of Images: Siena, 1338* (Polity Press, 2018).

[6] Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue a Study in Moral Theory* (3rd edn.; Notre Dame: Uni of Notre Dame Press, 2007). 181.

[7] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 129, Art. 1.

[8] Jacques Maritain, 'The End of Machiavellianism', *The Review of Politics*, 4/1 (1942), 1-33. 8.

[9] Ibid. 4.



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A guest post by

Dr, Leonard Taylor

Lecturer in Public law, and human rights law at Atlantic Technological University Ireland. He recently published a book titled 'Catholic Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights' with Cambridge University Press.

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